

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons
211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible
Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

1. Introduction

In our study of biblical symbolism, I've discussed general considerations that identify symbolic forms, their appearance and behavior in the scriptures. We've also examined specific symbols and types that define many of the more prominent figures appearing in the Bible. In the next three lessons we'll identify characteristics of prophecy in both the Old and New Testaments. In this lesson we'll discuss **Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets** and the effect this has on understanding the Bible.

2. Biblical prophecy and the 21st century

In past videos I've stressed the need to understand and preserve the context of passages including entire chapters and books. When we review different approaches to interpreting the Bible today we find a number of variations in how biblical prophecy is understood and applied. These perspectives reflect attitudes about the Bible and have an impact on doctrinal statements as well.

Fulfilled prophecy is the foundation of the New Testament and evidence for divine inspiration. Christ's identity as the Messiah rests on the volume of Messianic prophecy found in the Old Testament which also identifies the new law and kingdom established on the day of Pentecost. We understand prophecies relating to these events since their fulfillment is clear. In some cases such as Peter's statement on the day of Pentecost about the prophecy of Joel, we have direct references that identify the fulfillment of a specific prophecy.

Prophecy, like doctrinal statements, must be kept in their proper context. If we take a prophetic statement out of context it will have an effect on what we teach and ultimately what we practice. I pointed out that there are several factors involved in identifying and preserving the context. These include,

1. The subject under consideration
2. The audience being addressed
3. The time period during which the writing was done
4. The law in effect at the time

Discussing prophecy, we can use this list as a framework and make some adjustments to accommodate prophecies made in the Bible. We can identify the context of a prophecy as including:

1. The subject under consideration / purpose of the prophecy
2. The audience being addressed

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

3. Details in the prophetic statement
4. Conditions identifying fulfillment of the prophesy

These factors are vital in knowing when and how a prophecy has been fulfilled. Within the context of prophetic statements we'll have enough information to also identify the scope of a prophecy in terms of time. To understand prophetic statements we need to apply all of the above elements in order to understand them. So, to determine the extent and fulfillment of a specific prophecy, we'll need to understand the full context which will include

1. The subject under consideration
2. The audience being addressed
3. The time period during which the writing was done
4. The law in effect at the time
5. The purpose of the prophecy
6. Details in the prophetic statement
7. Conditions identifying fulfillment

If we observe these criteria and apply them to the scriptures we'll have a better grasp of what specific prophecies are talking about. One of the problems that we face today is a great deal of confusion generated when prophetic statements from the Old Testament in particular are applied to current events. Did God provide a roadmap to the end of the world in the writings of the Old Testament prophets? There are many who would affirm that he did. Certain doctrines such as Premillennialism rely on statements in Ezekiel, Daniel and Isaiah along with passages in the New Testament to bolster their arguments in favor of how they think the world will end. Is this appropriate? Lets's take a look at a specific example of a common misunderstanding of prophecy that fits in with certain views such as the "*purpose driven*" doctrines.

There are a lot of people who have a certain verse either as a refrigerator magnet or wall hanging of some sort and are encouraged and comforted by it. The problem is that the statement is taken out of context, misapplied and has no bearing on the lives of individuals. That verse is taken from Jeremiah and appears in varied forms. The verse is rendered as, "*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...*" (Jer 29.11). On the surface this passage, part of a longer prophecy, appears to be positive and uplifting. The context however limits its use and provides us with specific information regarding its fulfillment. Let's apply the factors above to identify the context of the prophecy

1. **Subject** - Babylonian exile of God's people (Jer 29.4)
2. **Audience** - Surviving elders among the exiles from Jerusalem (Jer 29.4)
3. **Time period** - Sometime after the first group of exiles were taken from Judah 606 B.C.

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

4. **Law** - Law of Moses
5. **Purpose** - instructions on how they should conduct themselves in exile (**Jer 29.5-9**)
6. **Details** - people are to marry, have children, seek peace and the prosperity of whatever city they are in and beware of false prophets (**Jer 29.5-9**)
7. **Conditions of fulfillment** - when seventy years are completed God will bring them back (**Jer 29.10**)

Following these statements God adds his assurance. *“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”* (**Jer 29.11 KJV**). The Lord adds additional information as to how they would be affected by this return. *“Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.”* (**Jer 29.12-14**).

So, does this have anything to do with our lives today? The answer is no. This prophecy was made to a specific group of people who had been taken from their country due to their sin. They were given the knowledge that God hadn't forgotten them and would be blessed in the end. Would it be appropriate for us to take comfort from this passage and apply it to our lives? No, not if we honor the context. There are a number of passages in the New Testament that lets us know how much God loves and care for us. We can't take a statement out of context which clearly refers to a limited application and use it to suit our own purposes. This is how false teaching and error takes root. When the context of anything in God's word is violated it leads to a cascading failure in understanding and accurately applying a number of principles and doctrines taught in the Bible. It also reflects the idea that the scriptures can be used to make people feel good about themselves in spite of what they're actually teaching.

This is one example of a common misunderstanding from an Old Testament prophecy. On the surface it doesn't seem to be harmful but when we take a deeper look at the doctrines supporting those who perpetuate these misinterpretations we find deeper errors that contradict the scriptures. We need to understand that no matter how much we'd like to turn to the scriptures and be able to tell what's going to happen in the world based on biblical prophecy, or feel good about ourselves, the fact is, we really can't do that. We have to respect and preserve biblical prophecy in its proper context and limits this imposes on interpretation. One of the ways we can visualize these limits is to construct a timeline of prophecies and their fulfillment.

3. The contextual framework

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

In order to determine the overall time range covered by the prophecies in the Old Testament, and recognize their limitations, we need to determine their context. Let's take a look at each of the prophetic books in light of the framework we covered earlier.

To get started I've divided the prophets into two groups. The first group are prophets that wrote before or during the final days of the nation of Israel. The second group are prophets that wrote during the period of time in which the remnant was returning and rebuilding Jerusalem and thereafter. Let's start with the first group and review the factors that determine the context of the prophetic writings.

1. The subject under consideration
2. The audience being addressed
3. The time period during which the writing was done
4. The law in effect at the time
5. The purpose of the prophecy
6. Details in the prophetic statement
7. Conditions identifying fulfillment

I'm going to jump ahead to number three and identify the time in which the first group of prophets wrote. This will then define the subject and audience being addressed in points one and two. The prophets that wrote before and during the downfall of the nation are:

1. Isaiah
2. Jeremiah
3. Ezekiel
4. Daniel
5. Hosea
6. Joel
7. Amos
8. Obadiah
9. Jonah
10. Micah
11. Nahum
12. Habakkuk
13. Zephaniah

The second group of prophets who wrote during the return of the remnant, the rebuilding of Jerusalem and later are:

1. Haggai

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

2. Zechariah
3. Malachi

Keep these in mind as we now go back to the first factor - the **subject** under consideration. There are three prophets that have a more limited focus that are easy to identify at this point. This includes:

1. Obadiah - who revealed God's judgment against Edom
2. Jonah - The reluctant prophet sent to warn Nineveh to repent
3. Nahum - Who pronounced God's judgment and destruction to come on Nineveh

Now let's take a look at the other prophets who wrote before and during the Babylonian exile. Subjects addressed by these prophets are:

1. Isaiah: God's judgments against Israel, Judah, other nations, prophecies of the Messiah
2. Jeremiah: Plea to Judah & Jerusalem, consequences, changes in the law, the Messiah
3. Ezekiel: Consequences to come on Jerusalem, restoration of the future kingdom
4. Daniel: Chronicle of Daniels experiences in Babylon and his visions
5. Hosea: Judgments against Israel & Judah for their evil
6. Joel: Judgment against Judah / Jerusalem, speaks of spiritual restoration
7. Amos: God's pronouncement of doom on Northern kingdom, future of David's throne
8. Micah: God's controversy with his people, the Messiah, evil of the rulers
9. Habakkuk: Invasion of Judah, judgement against the Babylonians, God's work
10. Zephaniah: Spoke of God's wrath against the nations, the remnant, truth established

The second factor is to identify the recipients or **those addressed** by the books. As before we can identify three prophets that dealt solely with nations other than Israel and Judah.

1. Obadiah - Wrote to Edom, the descendants of Esau
2. Jonah - was sent to the Assyrians and particularly the inhabitants of Nineveh
3. Nahum - Addressed the inhabitants of Nineveh / Assyria

The prophets who wrote to the Nations of Israel and Judah:

1. Isaiah: who prophesied primarily to Israel and Judah but included other nations
2. Jeremiah: Primarily addressed Judah but included Israel & other nations
3. Ezekiel: Wrote to those in Jerusalem after the first Babylonian captives were taken
4. Daniel: Chronicle of Daniels experiences in Babylon and his visions
5. Hosea: Primarily addressed the Northern kingdom of Israel as well as Judah, nations
6. Joel: Addresses the sinful nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

7. Amos: Spoke to the nations surrounding Israel & Judah as well as the children of Israel
8. Micah: Writing addressed to Samaria & Jerusalem
9. Habakkuk: General address to the kingdom of Judah
10. Zephaniah: The inhabitants of Judah and neighboring nations

The **time** period during which the prophets wrote is identifiable for some while there are others that we have to rely on descriptions of events and other references to approximate the time period in which they were recorded. The actual dates of the writings for the pre-exile prophets and those who wrote during the early period of captivity would roughly be covered by the time period of 800 to 536 B.C. The writings of the post-exile prophets would then be sometime after 536 to around 400 B.C. The books themselves sometimes provide internal clues as to the period. The time for each of the books is:

1. Isaiah During reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz & Hezekiah **(1.1)**
2. Jeremiah Reign of Josiah, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah **(1.2-3)**
3. Ezekiel The fifth year of Jehoiachin's captivity **(1.2)**
4. Daniel Jehoiakim's 3rd year **(1.1)** Cyrus 3rd year, **(10.1)**, Darius 1st yr **(11.1)**
5. Hosea In the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah kings of Judah **(1.1)**
6. Joel Thought to be one of the early prophets between 800 & 700 B.C.
7. Amos Uzziah king of Judah, Jereboam II of Israel **(1.1)**
8. Obadiah Possibly during the reign of Zedekiah due to verses 11 & 12
9. Jonah During reign of Jereboam II of Israel **(2 Kings 14.25)**
10. Micah In the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah **(1.1)**
11. Nahum Not indicated but prior to around 607 B.C.
12. Habakkuk Probably shortly before the invasion of Jerusalem in 606 B.C.
13. Zephaniah in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah **(1.1)**

The fourth factor in our determination of the overall context of the prophets is the **law** in effect at the time of the writings. For all of the prophets the law that was in effect was the Law of Moses.

The fifth factor, the purpose for the writing, is also easily identified. The writings of the prophets follow similar patterns. God calls to mind the blessings He has provided then confronts the people concerning their sin. A plea is made for Israel and Judah to repent but that plea in the later prophets becomes a declaration of destruction to come on them for their spiritual neglect. The prophets then detail the nature and extent of the destruction, further consequences and conditions the people will experience. Most of the prophets include a ray of hope in statements of a future time when all nations will be drawn to the Lord and restored. For Judah there's the promise of a remnant that will return to resume the work that God has been performing. The end

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

of the prophets is that there will come a new law and a ruler that will unite all nations under his spiritual leadership.

The sixth factor, details in the prophetic statements themselves, will point us in the direction of understanding the nature of what is to happen. Statements against the nations sometimes employ figurative language representing an apparent physical event or action that will take place. Some prophecies are concrete and specific such as Jeremiah's statement that the period of exile would last seventy years (**Jer 25.12**). There are also clear prophecies that indicate the physical overthrow of cities such as Nineveh, Babylon, Samaria and Jerusalem. Prophecies that speak of the coming restoration of God's people are sometimes stated in physical terms such as a return to Judah and Jerusalem but may have a dual nature in referring to the coming spiritual kingdom that God will establish. This is closely related to the seventh factor.

The seventh factor in establishing the context of prophetic writings and statements is the need to understand the **conditions that will identify fulfillment** of the prophecy. For many statements in the prophets this is straightforward. Destruction of the nations and city states named in the prophets can be seen from descriptions in the text and verification in external historical records. The return of the remnant can be identified from the writings of Jeremiah and the realization Daniel had that the time had come for their return (**Dan 9.1-2**). Statements about the Messiah are recognizable and we can easily identify that they speak of Christ. Areas that present a problem and foster misinterpretation center around the nature of the kingdom that will eventually be established. The prophets speak of this fulfillment in highly figurative terms and this presents a problem if they're not understood within the full context that we're attempting to identify. Errors in interpretation of the prophets are generally related to these areas.

Now that we've reviewed the pre-exile prophets and those who wrote during the exile we can do the same for the prophets who wrote following the return of the remnant. This a shorter list and the explanation for the seven factors is much more concise.

The prophets who wrote following the return from Babylonian exile are:

1. Haggai
2. Zechariah
3. Malachi

Let's apply our factors to identify their overall context.

First is the **subject** under consideration.

1. Haggai - Speaks of the reconstruction of the temple comparing the Temple of Solomon

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

with the future glory of the temple that God will build.

2. Zechariah - Speaks of the rebuilding the temple, the coming of the Messiah & his kingdom
3. Malachi - Rebukes the people for neglecting the law and speaks about the Messiah providing a sign that will precede his appearance.

Second is the **audience** being addressed.

1. Haggai - Addresses Zerubbabel - governor of Judah, Joshua the high priest
2. Zechariah - Delivers a message from God to the Jews - the remnant that has returned
3. Malachi - Writes to God's people in Judah

Third is the **time period** during which the books were written.

Haggai and Zechariah were both involved in the work of rebuilding the Temple and repair of the wall in Jerusalem. They're both contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah who led groups to perform this work. This would have been some time after 536 in which Cyrus issued a proclamation that allowed the Jews to return. There are some specific statements that indicate the time in which some of these books were written.

1. Haggai - Notes the 2nd year, 6th month, 1st day of Darius (**Haggai 1.1**)
2. Zechariah - Wrote in the 2nd year, 8th month of Darius (**Zech 1.1**)
3. Malachi - Time is believed to be around 450 to 400 B.C. 100 years after Ezra & Neh.

The **law in effect** at the time is the Law of Moses since these books deal with the restoration of the Jewish nation.

Each of the books has a similar **purpose**. The book of Haggai follows a fifteen year period following the rebuilding of the foundation for the Temple. Due to opposition by the enemies of the Jews the work had stopped and now the prophet let's the people know that the Lord expects them to complete the task they've been given.

Zechariah writes during the time when the work on the Temple has resumed. Its filled with images that point to the future providing encouragement to complete the work God has given the people.

Malachi deals with spiritual negligence on the part of the Jews and calls their sin to their attention. He provides a glimpse of the future and gives a sign that will announce the resumption of God's work.

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

Sixth are the **details** in the books. Haggai makes a comparison between the physical greatness of the temple built by Solomon and the restored Temple. This is followed by a contrast discussing the differences between them. Using the new temple as a figure, The prophet speaks of a time when the rebuilt temple will exceed the greatness of Solomon's.

Zechariah focuses on figurative and highly symbolic images that point to a future time. He speaks of the role of the high priest at the time and speaks of the spiritual significance of the priesthood.

Malachi is very direct in describing the neglect of God's people. They were offering blemished sacrifices, failing to give proper respect and tithes to the Lord. They were divorcing their wives for reasons not supported by God which was condemned by the Lord. He reminds the people of the judgments of God and describes a time when God will visit them in the "*day of the Lord*" (Mal 4.5).

Last are the **conditions for fulfillment**. For Haggai and Zechariah the fulfillment is met partially in a physical sense when the Temple is rebuilt and later the walls are completed. In a spiritual sense the new temple and things prophesied by Zechariah will be completed in the coming of the Messiah. Malachi clearly states "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children...*" (Mal 4.5-6). This statement provides a tangible element that can be observed when the fulfillment takes place. We find confirmation that this has been fulfilled when Christ speaks of John the baptizer and states, "*For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.*" (Matt 11.13-14).

I haven't specifically mentioned the book of Lamentations which was written by Jeremiah so I'll summarize that now before we move on. Jeremiah wrote before and during the Babylonian incursions into Judah. He survived the final assault on Jerusalem and was one of those left in the land. The book of Lamentations was written following the fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah counseled the people that were left not to go to Egypt since God had forbidden them to do this. The Lord's command, as many others, was ignored and a group left Judah which didn't end well for them. The book of Lamentations is exactly that; a lament. Its an outpouring of grief over the destruction of the children of Israel and the city of David. Within the book are statements about the Messiah and the coming judgment against the Edomites who aided Judah's enemies and ambushed those who fled the destruction.

Now that we have a better idea of the context of the Old Testament prophets we can focus on specific prophecies and their fulfillment. This will allow us to place events on a timeline with the goal of identifying an endpoint for these prophecies.

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

4. The temporal scope of Old Testament prophecy

In order to identify the endpoint or fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies we have to take a look at what the Lord revealed to the prophets and then compare that to history. Once we've done that we'll have a better idea of the date range involved in these prophetic statements. The bulk of these declarations refer to the judgment and destruction of God's people as a punishment for their sins and other nations for their evil as well.

Placing these in a temporal frame of reference we see that prophecies against the Northern kingdom of Israel were fulfilled in 722 B.C. with the Assyrian invasion and destruction of Samaria. The Assyrians were defeated and overwhelmed by the Scythians and their allies around 607 - 605 B.C. The Egyptians were defeated by the Babylonians at the battle of Carchemish around 606 B.C. after which the Chaldeans invaded Judah. The Babylonians took captives during this first invasion which included the prophet Ezekiel and the young man Daniel. A return to the area by the Babylonian army in 597 saw more captives taken. Finally, after Zedekiah revolts against the Babylonians they return in 586 B.C. and destroy the Temple, break down the walls and leave only the sick and those who were too old or weak to be of use behind.

The judgment against the Babylonians comes about around the year 539 B.C.. Three years later, around 536 B.C., the seventy years of exile have ended and Cyrus the Mede allows a group of Jews to return to their homeland to rebuild the Temple.

During this time the lesser powers that are spoken of in the prophets such as Damascus, representing the Syrians, Ashdod and the Philistines as well as Edom, Elam and other areas are all reduced in power and slowly fade from history. The Persian empire is eventually overcome by Alexander the Great who renders destruction to Tyre and Sidon as well around 332 B.C.. This is one of the kingdoms seen by Daniel in the latter part of his writing. A number of other kingdoms come and go as well. Alexander's kingdom is divided among four of his generals one of which is Ptolemy who takes possession of Egypt around 323 B.C.

With the rise of the Ptolemies in Egypt and other divisions of Alexander's empire the bulk of Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled. The only kingdom foretold beyond this period is identified in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel interpreted the king's dream in which he revealed that in the days of those kings God would set up a kingdom that was greater than any other. We can identify that as the Roman Empire and the fulfillment lies in the establishment of the church on the day of Pentecost.

So on a time line we can place the majority of Old Testament prophecy in the fulfilled category by the first century. There are only two other prophecies that go beyond the day of Pentecost and the establishment of the church. In a chronological sense the first of these is the

TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

211 - Prophecy, Symbolic Language & Interpreting The Bible

Part 1 - Establishing The Context & Scope Of The Old Testament Prophets

fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about God's people. Isaiah states, "*And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name.*" (Isa 62.2). This is fulfilled in the book of Acts as Luke records that "*the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.*" (Acts 11.26).

The last identifiable Old Testament prophecy we can name has to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Christ spoke of the destruction and tribulation to come on the nation in **Matthew 24** and **Luke 22**. Jesus provides a sign that will alert the faithful and allow them to escape. Christ states, "*When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains...*" (Matt 24.15-16). Christ's statement is a reference to **Daniel 12.11** and precisely identifies the time period and specific fulfillment of the prophecy.

In a general sense we can say that the prophecies that dealt with physical nations are fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. We can now place the scope of Old Testament prophecy within this spectrum from about 800 B.C. to A.D. 70. But there are other subjects that appear in the prophets that are treated figuratively and literally and these need to be examined next.

5. Next

In the next lesson we will continue our examination of Old Testament prophecy. We'll review specific areas that are repeated in the prophets and their fulfillment. We'll also look at prophetic language regarding the restoration of Israel and how that was to come about. This is an area that has caused a lot of confusion and often fuels bleak predictions for us in our time. Join me in the next lesson for a discussion of **Focal Points In Old Testament Prophecy**.